



Chapter 1

AGRICULTURE

HIGHLIGHTS

- Fully implement the Agriculture and Forestry Economic Development Task Force to improve interagency communication and coordination of rural economic development activities.
- Review the permitting process for Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations in order to improve the interagency permitting process for large livestock operations requiring nutrient management plans for animal waste handling.
- Implement outreach and planning efforts as part of the Forest Action Plan with an emphasis on conserving working forest landscapes, protecting forests from harm and enhancing public benefits derived from trees and forests.
- Improve the Tennessee Agriculture Enhancement Program application process by providing an online application and increasing automation and outreach efforts.

INTRODUCTION

As Tennessee’s first state agency, the Tennessee Department of Agriculture (TDA) promotes wise usage of its agricultural and forest resources, develops economic opportunities and ensures safe, dependable food and fiber. Tennessee’s farming industry is diverse with products ranging from cattle and poultry to tomatoes and honey. The department helps protect the farming industry and Tennesseans by ensuring food safety, proper pesticide use, fuel quality and fairness in the marketplace. The department protects forest resources from wildfire through prevention programs and urgent response to wildfire. TDA supports industry development through farmer incentive programs and promotional activities to expand markets.

TDA is divided into four major program areas: Administration, Forestry, Market Development and Regulatory Services.

Administration — Administration provides budgetary, legal, human resources and communications support to help department programs achieve goals and objectives in an efficient and cost-effective manner. Other programs within administration include the Agricultural Crime Unit, Boll Weevil Eradication, Commodity Distribution, Water Resources and a partnership with USDA to provide agricultural statistics.

Forestry — The Division of Forestry promotes the wise use of forest resources by helping landowners, fighting wildfires, providing quality seedlings, monitoring insects and diseases, improving urban forests, managing state forests, protecting water quality and collecting forest inventory data. To prevent wildfires, the division trains volunteer fire departments, issues burning permits, enforces fire laws and teaches the public fire safety.

Market Development — With its prime geographical location, transportation infrastructure and production capacity, Tennessee is poised to fully participate in the expanding world market for agricultural products. Market Development works to maximize economic opportunities for Tennessee agriculture through marketing and industry development programs and promotional services.

Regulatory Services — Regulatory Services monitors agricultural materials, food and consumer products and services to assure quality, public safety and a fair marketplace. This includes animal health and diagnostics, food and dairy inspections, ensuring petroleum quality and proper pesticide usage.

APPROACH/METHODOLOGY

The Tennessee Department of Agriculture's Top to Bottom Review has assessed all divisions and programs in order to determine how the department can best deliver services to the people of Tennessee. Input was gathered from employees and various stakeholders to identify areas for improvement which primarily uncovered various external factors influencing the department's ability to deliver services.

The Tennessee Department of Agriculture (TDA) has responded to significant changes in recent years in staffing, technology, revenue and customer demand for services. With these recent changes in mind, the department reviewed additional divisions and functions to discover opportunities for more efficient delivery of services. Within the Regulatory Services Division, the review focused on managing workloads, cross-training, incorporating technology and prioritizing activities and services. Administrative staff changes were also made to emphasize the department's focus on rural economic development and to proactively address key industry issues as they arise. In addition to program reviews, input was gathered from key stakeholders and from employees through a series of meetings held across the state.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Fully implement the Agriculture and Forestry Economic Development Task Force.

Discussion: Rural areas in Tennessee have not experienced the industry development and job growth seen by urban areas. Income levels are lower and many areas experience 'brain drain' as young people completing their education leave local communities. The Agriculture and Forestry Economic Development Task Force seeks to improve interagency communication and coordination of rural economic development activities. The objective of the Task Force is to create an interagency group to assist in setting priorities and developing strategies in support of Governor Haslam's overall commitment to rural economic development.



Recommendation 2: Improve the permitting process for Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFO) in order to develop the interagency procedure for large livestock operations requiring nutrient management plans for animal waste handling.

Discussion: The Tennessee Department of Agriculture Water Resources Program has been in a partnership with the Department of Environment and Conservation Division of Water Pollution Control since 1998 regarding the review and approval of nutrient management plans for Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs). The goal is to improve customer service to Tennessee livestock producers by streamlining and simplifying the permit application review process and implementing a standard operating procedure and memorandum of agreement between TDA and TDEC.

Recommendation 3: Study the process and minimum threshold for refunding overpayments made to the state.

Discussion: When a payment to the state exceeds the amount needed, refunds are required for balances exceeding five dollars. The issuance of a refund is labor intensive, costly, and must be issued even if the business or individual preferred the funds be credited to the next payment. The department recommends a review of the refund process to find a solution that is more efficient, convenient and economical to the customer and the state.

Recommendation 4: Implement State Forest Plan for 2020 which establishes a sustainable harvest level for the Tennessee State Forest system that ensures healthier state-owned forests for generations to come.

Discussion: The plan outlines five goals and thirty-two strategies to achieve healthy, sustainable and well-managed state forests. The Division of Forestry is in the process of completing department plans, which will be managed on schedule. In addition to dedicating Forestry staff to quality state forest management, the division is conducting outreach to elected officials, local residents and user groups on 2020 Plan actions.

Recommendation 5: Implement outreach and planning efforts as part of the Forest Action Plan.

Discussion: The Forest Action Plan is a comprehensive resource assessment and strategy developed collaboratively with many partners from across the state that identifies priority issues and landscape areas with an emphasis on conserving working forest landscapes, protecting forests from harm and enhancing public benefits derived from trees and forests. The Division of Forestry will initiate outreach to landowners, local residents, public officials and citizens in four critical watersheds in 2012 to raise awareness of the important link between forested landscapes and abundant quality water.

Recommendation 6: Improve the Tennessee Agricultural Enhancement Program application process and outreach.

Discussion: The Tennessee Agricultural Enhancement Program (TAEP) is a cost-share program for Tennessee farmers. Applications are submitted in early June, and it generally takes 8-10 weeks to notify farmers of their application status. Unfortunately, not all applications can be funded and it currently operates on a first-come, first-serve basis. The goal is to make the application process easier by providing an online application and increasing automation and outreach efforts. Online applications will ensure forms have all required information, which in turn will speed up the process. Secondly, application approval will be based on project priorities as identified by the applicants rather than the current first-come, first-serve basis. This allows the department to fund higher priority projects for more farmers.